CHEAP TRUTH

EDITORIAL: Hi. You want to know the truth. We want to tell it to you. Let's try to keep the economics between us to a minimum, okay? Right, let's do it.

QUEST FOR DECAY

As American SF lies in a reptilian torpor, its small, squishy cousin, Fantasy, creeps gecko-like across the bookstands. Dreaming of dragon-hood, Fantasy has puffed itself up with air like a Mojave chuckwalla. SF's collapse has formed a vacuum that forces Fantasy into a painful and explosive bloat.

Short stories, crippled with the bends, expand into whole hideous trilogies as hollow as nickel gumballs. Even poor Stephen Donaldson, who struggles to atone for his literary crimes with wet hippy sincerity, has been forced to re-xerox his Tolkien pastiches and doubly insult the public. As Robert E. Howard spins in his grave, the Chryslers of publishing attach rotors to his head and feet and use him to power the presses.

But the editors have eaten sour grapes and the writers' teeth are on edge. Fantasy, for too long the vapid playground of MacCaffreyite unicorn-cuddlers and insect-eating S.C.A. freaks, has some new and dangerous borderlands. Suddenly, perhaps out of sheer frustration, fantasy has movement and color again. It is the squirming movement of corruption and the bright sheen of decay.

Some Examples

NIFFT THE LEAN by Michael Shea. DAW, $2.95. Jack Vance's acolyte, author of the apprentice work QUEST FOR SIMBILIS, Shea has suddenly and fearsomely come into his own. This astonishing work shows a furious imaginative concentration that is impressive and even appalling. The legitimate heir of Vance, Leiber, and Clark Ashton Smith, Shea rips aside the polite, smirking ironies of these polished writers and shows us a crawling, boiling vision of the demonic. He is a Fender Stratocaster to Vance's Stradivarius.

For those familiar with Vance's work, the effect is odd and disquieting, like seeing a favorite uncle stumble in, blasted on bad acid and mumbling cosmic obscenities. There are supernatural horrors here that make Cthulhu and his boys look as tame as pinstriped bankers. Hell itself, its denizens and its environs, are captured with a revolting nicety of detail and expression that makes you wonder for the author's sanity.

Shea is doing for the outworn tradition of heroic fantasy what Swinburne did to the tradition of romantic poetry: namely, piling it up in a heap and setting it on fire. And, like Swinburne, he does it with so much insight that he renders the tradition obsolete. Heroic fantasy is already moribund; Shea's book is, strictly speaking, a work of decadence, even of necromancy. This is an important, even crucial book, with the lurid brilliance and craftsmanlike discipline of a Bosch canvas. Not to be missed.

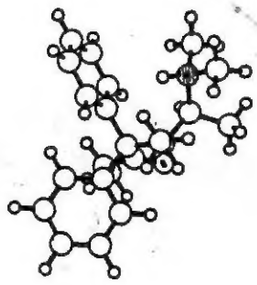
RED AS BLOOD by Tanith Lee. DAW, $2.50. The morbid smirk of the stereotyped fantasy damsel on the Michael Whelan cover of this book personifies fantasy's new decadence. Lee's talent has always threatened to overwhelm the narrow limits of her innumerable cape-and-thick-ankles bodice-busters, and this time she has the bit between her teeth and takes off for parts unknown.

She has returned to fantasy's roots -- the 4/4 beat of Grimm's fairy tales -- and ripped it up in a way that Ramones fans might find eerily familiar. This is a very punk book -- all red and black -- and it has some of the end-of-the-world energy of a '77 Pistols gig. These stories are twisted -- tales of bloodlust, sexual frustration, schoolgirl nastiness, murderous vengeance, world-devouring ennui, and a detailed obsession with Satanism that truly makes one wonder.

Casual readers may find some of these stories dense and opaque. Lee's prose has a cryptic, involuted quality, which creates the impression that she is hinting at matters too blasphemous to speak of openly. It's a peculiar style, alternately annoying and frightening.

Some of this apparent awkwardness is the result of a refusal to compromise. It is the sign of an artist struggling to explain her visions in what amounts to a private dialect. Even the failures are a left-handed tribute to her integrity. She is uniquely gifted.

If you are the kind of fan who wants to have a dragon for a friend and loves small furry animals, stay away from this book, because you might die from it.



LYONESSE by Jack Vance. Berkley, $6.95
This latest effort has all the qualities Vance devotees cherish: vivid clarity in description, clever, colorful protagonists, fully realized societies complete with Vance's trademark footnotes, and headlong, exciting plotting that has footloose freedom without becoming slipshod.

It's true that Vance has only one voice: a carefully crafted, mock-archaic one. Vance characters, from wizards to galactic effectuators, always speak with the same sense of antiquated, polite calculation. In LYONESSE, a pair of housecats are given the power of speech, and when they immediately pipe up with a uniquely Vancian courteous peevishness the effect is irresistably (and deliberately) hilarious. It's a voice that has served Vance well, and has even been borrowed wholesale by Michael Shea without becoming tiresome.

Vance's works have always had a veiled darker side; they are replete with wine-sipping perverts whose sidelong glances and polite insinuations hint at unspeakable vices. Vance is a writer of rare perception; although he created many of the parameters of modern fantasy, he is clearly aware of their exhaustion. His answer, like Shea's, is to turn up the amps.

Thus we have a female character whose suffering innocence almost reminds one of deSade's Justine. There is a definite, quiet cruelty in this book that is presented with an alarming sense of relish. Characters are blinded, tortured, branded, buggered, thrown into wells and left to die. Women and children especially are singled out for torment; one long section is a Tanith Lee-esque black fairy tale, and its peculiar viciousness is cynically funny. At last Vance even turns on the reader, for the book's ending is a cruel joke. It hints at books to follow, but since Vance's languorous attitude toward sequels is legendary, his audience is probably doomed to a long session on the tenterhooks.

THE FLOATING GODS by M. John Harrison. Timescape, $2.50. This book is called IN VIRICONIUM in Britain, but was stupidly retitled for American release, presumably because Timescape believes we are boneheads. It's the third book in a sword-and-sorcery trilogy that includes THE PASTEL CITY and A STORM OF WINGS.

It's clear that a different but allied form of decadence has struck Across the Water. Its trademark is not perversion, but exhaustion. PASTEL CITY rejoiced in such sprightly characters as Tomb, "the nastiest dwarf that ever hacked the hands off a priest," whose rotten malevolence was a welcome relief from Harrison's sometimes stifling meditations on spiritual decline.

FLOATING GODS has no such characters. It is set in a city smothered under a nebulous Plague Zone. Possibly Harrison has spent too much time in Brixton. Despair seems to have been printed across his eyeballs in letters of fire. THE FLOATING GODS is a relentless exercise in total, stifling futility; it is one long, gray, debilitating dream.

Harrison's extraordinary talent merely crams the reader's head more firmly into the bucket. It is impossible to read this book without considering suicide. It is painful to read; painful even to think about. Let's hope to God something happens soon to cheer him up.

CHEAP TRUTH TOP TEN

These new editions are readily available at your local smokestack-industry chainstore bookstand. You could do a lot worse.

1. SOFTWARE Rudy Rucker. Ace, 2.25. Pyrotechnic work by deranged math professor. The hottest thing going in contemporary SF.
2. UNIVERSE 10 Terry Carr, ed. Zebra, 2.50. Fine anthology reduced to utter penury. Should be bought for the good of the genre.
3. PAST MASTER R. A. Lafferty. Ace, 2.50. Classic Lafferty. His most decipherable SF novel.
4. THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS Ursula K. LeGuin. Brilliant Le Guin from her pre-didactic era. Has modern intro with words like "semiotic" and "positivist."
5. THE IRON DREAM Norman Spinrad. Timescape, 2.95. Biting parody of fascistic SF power fantasies. Genuinely bizarre.
6. THE MONSTER OF THE PROPHECY Clark Ashton Smith. Timescape, 2.50. Curious archaeological relic from the Golden Age. Outrageous, clotted prose.
7. THE KING IN YELLOW Robert W. Chambers. Ace, 2.50. What fantasy was like before its prostitution.
8. A WORLD OUT OF TIME Larry Niven Del Rey, 2.50. Heartening indication that Niven may escape total artistic collapse.
9. CREATURES OF LIGHT AND DARKNESS Roger Zelazny. Avon, 2.25. Self-indulgent pastiche of his best work. Flashes of brilliance. Beats being smothered in amber.
10. ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK Mike McQuay. Bantam, 2.50. Surprisingly decent novelization. Makes more sense than the movie.

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